

TOUGH MONKEYS

Buckmore Park Elite Championship Round 8: 11/10/09

It's flown by but the end of the 2009 season came and went this Sunday with the final round of the Elite Championship. By even the most optimistic of appraisals it's been a terrible championship for us, plummeting from 2007 winter champions and 2008 summer runners-up in the forerunning Team of Steel series to struggling to stay in the top ten in the Elite. We've exercised the entire Racing Driver's Book of Excuses (available in all good bookstores) this year, everything including wheels and exhausts falling off, botched pit stops and good old fashioned driver errors. We were determined to finish the season off on a high note, building on the good run that Mig and I had at the previous round, and Barry was back with us sporting his race face. I was especially keen for a good race as after a few months of considerations I have decided that I will be taking 2010 off from racing, possibly retiring from karting for good, so I wanted one last fight. This was my final race as part of the GP Toughmonkeys stable and we wanted to go out on the high that we'd attained over the previous two seasons together.

I've been thinking this decision over for sometime now and it's not been taken lightly. I love the thrill of racing and feeling a kart dancing about under me, but just as importantly I've got many good friends that I've made in and around Buckmore. However my priorities in life have changed and karting is no longer the most important thing to me. I began karting when I was young (ish), free and single and I'm no longer any of those things now. Spending time with TC is much more appealing to me and the money I would otherwise be spending on karting will be much better served putting towards getting a place together. Karting may be considered entry level motorsport but it's still a very expensive past time and a considerable strain on my resources. When you factor in my significant travelling expenses (350 mile round trip in an Impreza on super unleaded every race) and associated costs my four years racing at Buckmore, Le Mans and wherever else will have set me back close to £16k. Next season the timings of the races would require more hotel stop-overs too so it wouldn't be getting any cheaper either. It's been very heartening that I've had so many people tell me how sorry they are to see me go, and some expressing outright shock. It's unlike me but for once I'm putting my sensible hat on and thinking about the future. To do so, however, it means hanging up my crash helmet.

So for the last time for the foreseeable future I spent the Saturday night prior to the race sleeping in the back seat of the Scooby and awoke to a light dusting of drizzle on the roof. I was hoping for the forecasted rain to arrive as I enjoy throwing the C100s around in the wet but I was to be denied this pleasure as although it threatened to give more the moisture stayed away. Practice got underway and the karts headed out on to the track with only the overnight dampness still thinly covering the tarmac. I was the third kart out of the paddock, our machine stubbornly doing its best not to fire up but my attempts at 2-stroke foreplay saw it cough into life at the last possible moment and I kangaroo hopped onto the circuit. I was met immediately with the sight of Adrian Matthews, the first driver out, buried in the tyre wall at Garda. A later chat revealed that his efforts at his first braking of the day had proved unresponsive as the drizzle had left things a little more lubricated than first thought. This was a wake-up call and I spent the next few laps gingerly finding the grip as I built the kart up to temperature. I took the wet line to start with and at that point the kart felt pretty good, if lacking grunt down the straight. The relative slow lap times though masked what was soon to be

revealed as a slow kart. It braked and turned well but had no top end which was to prove pivotal in the qualifying which Barry was to do for the team.

As the track and karts warmed up everyone else began to get faster while our times got no better. Barry was obviously trying as hard as he could, Mig and I both noticing he was a bit leery at times as he tried to attain a time that the kart clearly wasn't willing to yield. The session ended with us a very disappointing 16th on the grid out of 19. I wasn't happy but at least I would be involved in plenty of action as I would be starting the race with lots of karts in front to try to overtake. As it happened I had even more karts to pass than I should have as myself and Le Mans team manager Steve Hall got stuck at the very back of the pack on the rolling up laps and could find no way through to take our rightful places. Neither of us were particularly bothered so just waited for the lights to go green and got on with it.

I was anticipating making up places with the usual first lap carnage that happens but everything appeared to be clean and tidy. This meant that I crossed the line at the end of the first lap in 18th place and defending that position it seemed only from the pusher kart which was following ready to pick up any stray karts. I had work to do.

Sadly for me the work was made all that more difficult because we had no speed with which to carry me past the karts in front. I had to make do with playing a waiting game and pouncing on errors by others. I slowly picked karts off one at a time, following Steve through the tail-enders until we were both in the clear and I latched onto his tail looking for a way through. For several laps I looked for a gap but couldn't see a safe way to overtake and didn't fancy much punting off my former team manager! He explained to me afterwards that he was suffering from understeer and it was this that led to my opportunity to get by as he ran wide on the exit of Conways. It only slowed him a fraction but it allowed me a run up the inside under braking for HP1, a place that I've never been particularly confident of getting past people. I had the anchor fully out to get the kart to slow down as I sent a move up the inside under braking, overshooting marginally but managing to get back on line before Steve could perform the switchback. After I was past him I had a large clear run to the next place as they'd managed to clear off into the distance. I got my head down and went off in search of them, slowly creeping up behind them and eventually getting past.

As we were running a long first stint by the time I pitted we actually led the race, but after the stops had played out we were actually running 11th. Barry took over the driving from me for the first of his two runs, and gave his all in a vain effort to drag us further up the leaderboard but really the performance potential of the kart meant that we would not be getting any higher without problems for other teams.

Unfortunately, it would once again be our kart that provided the problems. Midway through Mig's stint he was still in our 11th place stalemate when he suddenly disappeared from view. I was talking to Jack and Steve while munching on a cheeseburger when Barry wandered over to ask why he'd dropped off the leaderboard. It was then that I noticed a frantically waving Mig standing in the pitlane over by the mechanics workshop. We ran over, burgers still in hand, to discover our Reliant Robin of a kart that had shed a wheel which caused at the very least minor handling issues. Several lost laps later and Mig returned to the track to complete his stint.

So then it was my final stint. Final in the race, in the season and for the foreseeable future. The race was a lost cause but I wanted to get out and have some fun. Forget the depressing season and forget the depressing race. Sadly though no one had told the kart this. I got approximately ten feet before the chain decided it had done enough work for the day and fell apart, leaving me to coast to a halt in front of the on looking paddock all of whom shaking their heads and wondering just how many mirrors we'd broken to get this kind of luck.

The pusher kart was on hand quickly, but for whatever reason was seen fit I had to be pushed around half of the track back to the pits where I boarded a waiting replacement kart and finally started my shortened stint. Now down in 18th place and racing for nothing more than fun I was at least comforted by a kart that felt quicker than the previous effort. I had an enjoyable final stint, sitting right on the tail of Dave Tebbutt for the majority of it.

All too soon though the pit signal came out to pull me in and once more I handed over to Barry. He returned to the track where he finished the season off for GP Toughmonkeys, putting in our fastest lap of the day, while I returned to the Scooby waiting obediently in the car park and took off the Power Ranger outfit for the last time. Packing my overalls away and putting my helmet back in its bag I wondered when, if ever, I'd put them back on again.

All that remained was for Barry to bring the kart back home and bring to an end two years together as a team. Two championship winner's trophies, a runner-up and a third place pot will be the reminder of how good we were together. This season has been disappointing and very frustrating but won't take anything away from how much I've enjoyed being with Mig and Barry and all the WAGs that went with them!

So, that's it for now folks. It doesn't seem like just four seasons, but I crammed a lot in to that time. I still remember my first Ironman race, my first podium and first race win. Experiences such as nearly 8 hours of racing at Le Mans will always be with me, as will the many friendships I've built up in this time. Barry and Mig, I'm really going to miss racing with you two and I'm proud of you Mig for standing on the verge of winning the Man of Steel this year. It remains to be seen if I'll ever be back in the race seat, but I'll always be happy with what I've achieved if I don't, or come back with a ferocious hunger to win if I do.

Everyone, it's been a pleasure.

Craig.